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ABSTRACT

The paper defines the concept of mobbing and notes alternate terms such as bullying, scapegoating, and group violence or aggression. Scandinavian research and literature on mobbing is analyzed, especially as it relates to the incidence of mobbing and characteristics of aggressor and victim. Intervention efforts are described, such as individual and group interviews with perpetrators and victims, establishment of acceptable norms of behavior that include respect for the individual, and tackling the psychological defenses of the bullies in therapeutic interviews. Prevention attempts are also noted, such as peer sponsors, class meetings, conveying information about mobbing to parents and teachers, reading and discussing stories about mobbing, and role playing. (21 references) (JDD)

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Mobbing in the Schools. Scandinavian Initiatives in the Prevention and Reduction of Group Violence among Children

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Introduction

In Scandinavia there is much concern about a form of social deviance called mobbing. For almost two decades the phenomenon has been extensively studied in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, and many attempts have been made both to prevent and to stop this behavior which has been found to cause much suffering among children both within and outside school settings. A remarkable aspect of this problem is that it has been almost entirely ignored in other industrialized countries. Only in the United States has there within the past four or five years been an attempt to emulate the efforts being made in the Nordic countries to come to grips with this pernicious form of behavior disorders. In one other country, Japan, has bullying or ijime been recognized as a major social problem in the public schools, sometimes even resulting in murder or suicide. Although there has been much theorizing about the causes of this epidemic of violence, little has been done to intervene with such mob action among the young (Prewitt, 1988, Wysock, 1985).

The major purpose of this paper is to cast the spotlight on the work that has been done in Scandinavia to combat mobbing in the schools. For the purpose of variety, alternate terms to be used include bullying, scapegoating, and group violence or aggression. The content includes some pertinent definitions, an overview of research and writing on the issue, and finally a description of some of the approaches that have been used or recommended both with regard to prevention and intervention.

Definitions of the Concept of Mobbing

The word "mob" is derived from the Latin "mobile vulgus" and entered the English language meaning a disorderly crowd, especially one bent on riotous and destructive action. As a verb it means to attach in a mob and to crowd around and molest. The term was introduced into social psychology and was first used in Scandinavia in this connection around 1970 in some articles by the Swedish physician Heinemann about the dynamics of group violence against individuals and particularly in his epoch-making 1972 book called Mobbing. Gruppvald bland barn och vuxna. (Mobbing, group violence among children and adults). Because there are no other words with the same exact meaning in the Scandinavian

languages, it was quickly adopted both in the behavioral sciences and in ordinary parlance.

Several authors have defined the term. Pikas (1975) describes it as repeated negative acts of physical or psychological attacks or isolation from the group directed towards an individual by two or more persons. It is also characteristic of mobbing that it is looked upon as unlawful or contrary to society's norms, that the negative objective becomes an end in itself, and that mobbers reinforce each other's behavior. In an American article, Olweus (1987) defines what he calls bullying in the following general way.

> A person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons...Negative action can be carried out by words, by threatening, humiliating, degrading, deriding, or saying mean and nasty things to another person...Bullying is also involved when a person hits, kicks, slaps, pushes, holds another person against his or her will, or makes faces or dirty gestures. (p. 4)

An Overview of Research and Writing

The first explicit description of mobbing in Scandinavian literature can be found in H.C. Andersen's 19th century fairy tale "The Ugly Duckling." In the early 1920's the Norwegian animal psychologist Schjelderup-Ebbe (1922) lent scientific respectability to the phenomenon through his systematic observation of pecking behavior among domestic chickens. He called the chicken which was pecked on or hacked "hakkekylling," a term that has been adopted for the victims of scapegoating.

The first major publication on mobbing was the book by Heinemann mentioned above. The following year Olweus (1973) completed a comprehensive study of mobbing in the public schools in Stockholm. His investigation included about 900 boys. The results indicated that about five percent of the pupils were perpetrator and five percent were victims of mobbing. About the same time, Pikas (1975) at the University of Uppsala led a similar inquiry among 500 school children. Of these, 4.8 percent reported that they were often the victims of mobbing, and 14.0 percent said it happened sometimes. Also, 1.5 percent admitted that they acted as bullies often, and 15.0 percent asserted that they did it once in a while. In other Swedish studies the percentage of victims ranged from 2.2 to 12.5 percent. These

variations apppeared to reflect different criteria for mobbing and the nature of the populations under study. In Finland, Ekman (1977) found that 4.2 percent of 14-16 year old youth were regularly attacked. In Norwegian studies, the numbers generally vary between 5.0 and 10.0 percent. However, Roland (1980) who ranks as a foremost expert on mobbing, found in one inquiry among high school students that 5.3 percent were pestered every day and 7.8 percent one or more days per week.

Olweus has in recent years carried on his work at the University in Bergen. His activities have three facets. First, he is continuing a longitudinal study of the 900 boys from his original Stockholm project and collecting data on a variety of behavioral dimension. Secondly, he is pursuing prevalence studies both in Norway and Sweden. One in Norway has included 140,000 students from 715 schools. A similar Swedish investigation comprises some 17,000 children from 60 schools. Thirdly, Olweus is conducting several comprehensive prevention and intervention projects.

Some of the researchers have in their epidemiological studies also attempted to explore some causal connections in mobbing behavior and to confirm or reject certain theoretical assumptions. Relying upon biological, psychodynamic, and environmental concepts, Olweus formed

a schema of four major interacting factors: general background and home conditions, physical characteristics of the victims and the bullies, psychological characteristics of the victims and the bullies, and the school milieu.

The following findings are based on both his original research and his most recent investigations. He found that the typical victims were characterized by an anxious personality pattern combined with physical weakness. They also tended to be passive. A small subgroup showed a combination of anxious and provocative or aggressive features. They were often cautious, sensitive, and shy, lacked friends and looked upon themselves as stupid and unattractive. In contrast, bullies showed an aggressive personality pattern combined with physical strength. They were impulsive, had a strong need to dominate others, had a positive attitude towards the use of violent means, and had a relatively favorable view of themselves. Regarding the family situation, victims had closer contact and more positive relations with their parents than children in general. On the other hand, bullies grew up in families with negative emotional attitudes, permissiveness towards the child's aggressive behavior, and "power-assertive" child-rearing methods including physical punishment.

In his surveys Olweus found that incidents of group violence were up to five times greater in some schools than in others, even within the same community. Aggression-generating factors included conflict-ridden home background in neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization and a general lack of care and supervision. In the school setting, the attitudes, routines, and behaviors of the teachers were of decisive importance. The extent to which the school playgrounds were supervised by teachers made a significant difference.

Olweus' investigations dealt with larger populations, and conclusions were based on statistical averages. He thus found that deviation in exterior appearance, such as being too fat or small, seemed to have little effect on whether a child became an object of scapegoating. Some mobbing experts find these generalizations of limited value, as they perceive each situation to be unique and requiring specific interventions.

Prevention and Intervention

The startling discoveries about the prevalence of scapegoating in the Scandinavian schools quickly led to diverse attempts by the school authorities, mental health agencies, and the public at large to do something about it. As early as 1975, Pikas published a book about an intervention project conducted in the

departments of education and psychology at the University of Uppsala. Pikas was an expert in communications problems and conflict resolutions, and he used his methods both in individual and group interviews with perpetrators and victims in mobbing situations. The results tended to be positive. In one instance, out of 17 referred cases, 15 had a satisfactory solution. Since then Pikas has been intensely involved in anti-mobbing measures, and he has continually refined his procedures. His most recent approach is called the Common Concern Method which was described in a book published in Swedish in 1987 and a 1989 English language article in School Psychology International. According to this method, therapeutic talks begin with the students suspected of being mobbers. These interviews may be done individually or with the whole group depending on circumstances. The talk does not start as an interrogation to uncover or state the guilt of a suspected mobber. Rather the dialogue takes the form of communication on equal terms to develop a common concern about the mobbing situation leading to a partnership between the therapist and mobber to bring about a constructive outcome. The bullies are generally eager to support positive solutions. With the victim the talks focus on what he or she can do to improve the situation.

At the end, the antagonists are usually brought together, and the conflict is carried to a satisfactory solution.

Aarland has taken exception to some of Olweus' generalizations regarding causal factors in mobbing and maintains that most situations have their special circumstances and require handling that fits the individual situation. In his 1986 book about the prevention of mobbing and violence he illustrates his position with numerous case studies from his experience as a teacher of behavior disordered children and as a school psychologist in Norway. In his strategies to prevent aggression in the schools, Aarland draws upon several sources. They include Thomas Gordon's (1974) teacher effectiveness training, William Glasser's (1969) reality therapy and the related pedagogy of involvement elaborated by the Dane Poul Nissen (1978), Johnson and Johnson's (1975) philosophy of cooperative learning, and the suggestology of the Bulgarian Lozanov (1978). Aarland finds it especially useful for a school or a class to clarify values and establish acceptable norms of behavior that include respect for the individual.

In his book Strategi mot Mobbing (Strategy against mobbing) (1983), Roland offers suggestions on how to tackle the psychological defenses of the bullies in the therapeutic interviews. They include minimizing

or denying one's own role, placing the responsibility on other participants, or blaming the victim.

In prevention, Roland elaborates on several procedures that may be effective.

Reading of literature. The class may read together and discuss a story about mobbing. This is done best with the class sitting in a circle with the teacher while someone reads the story to the group. This provides opportunity for the clarification and strengthening of positive values and for building solidarity and social binding. It might be mentioned that there is in Scandinavia a considerable amount of fictional and factual literature on mobbing written for children at different age levels.

Written work. Essays and other written work bring out children's thoughts and feelings. It is best if the pupils themselves read their papers to the class.

Drama. This procedure may take different forms. In one third grade class the pupils wrote a play about mobbing which was performed before other classes. The issues can also be brought to light in the form of sociodrama, sometimes with the participants in an actual episode playing themselves or in a role reversal.

Peer sponsors. This is an arrangement in which a student or a group of students has assumed the responsibility

for other, usually younger children who have problems. This system is particularly common in Norway where it is generally looked upon as effective. It is, however, important that the sponsors are carefully selected, know what they are supposed to do, and are properly supervised by the teachers.

Class meetings. This type of procedure is based on the previously mentioned pedagogy of involvement, which assumes that mutually responsible relations between individuals is necessary for personal growth. These meetings could take place daily and may take three forms: Open debate, informational, and social problem-solving.

In his prevention programs, Olweus (1986, 1987) approaches the problems on a broad front from concrete and specific measures to wider social and cultural considerations. In Norway he was in 1983 asked to chair a national campaign against bully and victim problems in the public schools. The precipitating event was a report that three young boys had committed suicide ostensibly as the result of severe scapegoating. The major goals of the project were to reduce the incidence of bullying behavior and to prevent the development of new occurrences. One objective was to convey information about mobbing to parents, teachers,

and students. For this purpose the task force prepared a booklet for teachers about bully/victim problems and what to do about it, a brochure for parents, a video-cassette about mobbing, and an informational inventory for students intended to provide information about the prevalence of group violence in a school. This material was made available to the schools throughout the country.

The campaign had four main purposes: To increase general awareness of and knowledge about the problem of mobbing, to achieve active involvement on the past of parents and teachers, to develop clear rules against bullying with the enforcement of sanctions against rule violations, and to provide support and protection for the victims of scapegoating. To Olweus it was a fundamental democratic right that every person should be spared oppression and repeated, intentional humiliation. However, he also had much concern for the bullies, as his longitudinal studies showed that 60 percent of the boys who were nominated as bullies in their younger years had at least one court conviction by the time that they were 24 and that 40 percent of the bullies had three or more court convictions by that age (Olweus, 1987).

As part of the national project, Olweus conducted a prevention program in the city of Bergen. It involved 2,400 students from 42 schools. In a followup two years later, there was a decrease of 50 percent of bully/victim problems following the campaign. In addition there was a sharp drop in vandalism, theft, and similar behaviors and an increase in student satisfaction with school life.

In Denmark many of the efforts to prevent or reduce mobbing or what is there also referred to as group terror take place within the classrooms in the form of discussions or role-playing. Svendsen (1977) has provided a description of 16 conflict situations as the point of departure for such activities. The names of some of these episodes are: "When Jorgen was chosen last," "Fatah from Pakistan," "Christian stutters," "The new pupil," "Leif has red hair," "Susanne is fat," "Lice," and "Tina wears glass." The booklet also has a guide for teachers, a questionnaire for the pupils, and a mostly annotated list of relevant readings.

In 1989 the Danish ministry of Education published a small book about mobbing (Om mobning, 1989). It was based upon about 300 responses to a request from the minister of education to the student councils in

the nation's schools (the first nine grades) to describe the mobbing situation in their schools, what they thought the causes might be, what they had done to prevent it, and what proposals they might have to further reduce the problem.

The letters from the student councils and some from individual gave evidence that mobbing took many forms both psychological and physical. The booklet contains many suggestions of what parents, teachers, and students can do to combat violence in the schools. It has a play written by a group of eighth graders, a list of suggested readings, a not unexpected quotation from "The Ugly Duckling," and the ten commandments or "The Jante Law" by the Danish author Axel Sandemose. The essence of these commandments is that one should not feel good about oneself, a burden of self-doubt many people in the north believe is part of their cultural inheritance. This is followed by a positive "Jante Law" a list of statements about every individual's dignity and intrinsic worth.

Conclusions

For about two decades the Scandinavian public has been aware of the high incidence of violence in the public schools, particularly in the form of mobbing or groups attacking individuals. The recognition that

such behavior was against the welfare and human rights of the victims led first of all to much research regarding the extent and the causes of the problem. Secondly, many attempts have been made to prevent or to stop this terrorism. They have ranged from interviews with victims and perpetrators to national information campaigns.

There is much evidence that these endeavors have had positive results. However, there is also concern that mobbing continues at unacceptable levels. It is possible that the forces in society that create a mobbing mentality among the young are on the increase. They include the deterioration of family life, the loosening of social and community cohesiveness, and the glorification of anti-social behavior and violence in the news media.

There is little doubt that the mobbing problem which has been openly recognized and dealt with in Scandinavia, may also be a menace in other countries. Responsible school authorities may benefit from drawing upon the experiences and knowledge gained in the Nordic countries to confront similar behavior disorders in their own communities.

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